

Building Carnegie Hall, 1889

Introduction

In early 1889, industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie was working on plans for a major music hall in New York City. On January 31, 1889, Carnegie wrote to Hiram Hitchcock, the owner of New York's Fifth Avenue Hotel, to negotiate Hitchcock's involvement in finding land for the project. Hitchcock was an entrepreneur who was also involved in the building of Madison Square Garden. Carnegie was eager to begin construction on the new venue, offering Hitchcock only two weeks to finish their negotiations. "We must begin at once," wrote Carnegie, "We have property in view & quite ready to go on & build the Hall . . . although we will wait on you until Feb 15th." Carnegie specified locations where he was interested in building the hall: "not below 56th or . . . upon Madison Square." Ultimately, Carnegie chose land on Seventh Avenue at 57th Street, donating one million dollars for the land and the hall's construction. The Music Hall (later re-named Carnegie Hall) opened on May 5, 1891.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. How did Carnegie's plans illustrate the interests of the wealthy during the Gilded Age?
2. Carnegie's fortunes endowed libraries nationwide as well as other cultural institutions. How can we explain his willingness to support such philanthropy?
3. To what extent should we admire Carnegie as a benevolent industrialist or consider his contributions "conscience" money?

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Image

Jan 31/89
 5 WEST FIFTY-FIRST STREET,
 NEW YORK.

My Dear Mr Hitchcock

You need —
 we must begin at once
 if Hall is to be ready
 for next winter.

Please let the understood
 between us that if upon
 my return from the fourth
 day February 15th you have
 not succeeded that we
 consider the idea given

to clear a path from Mortgage &
 lease to us, but need not want to
 increase your May
 investment.

Andrew Carnegie
 He will organize Feb 15th under
 The Gilder Lehrman Collection

Andrew Carnegie to Hiram Hitchcock, January 31, 1889 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC02896)

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up. We have property
 in new & quite ready
 up on divided the Hall
 Capital all ready -
 although we will wait
 on you until July 15th -
 If we build it
 will be much further
 up town - not below
 56th. Would not build
 upon Madison Square
 if we have to choose

beyond the ^{cost} 50,000 I agreed to take
^{1/10} Perhaps if your people heard
 us found ~~we~~ agreed that our
 investment for Hall should bear
~~up to 6%~~ interest upon cost out
 of first net receipts, before grand
 rent was payable. We might consider
 it - in that case you would have

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Transcript

Andrew Carnegie to Hiram Hitchcock, January 31, 1889 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC02896)

Jany 31/89

5 West Fifty-First Street,

New York

My Dear Mr. Hitchcock

Yours rec'd — We must begin at once if Hall is to be ready for next winter.

Please let it be understood between us that if upon my return from the South say February 15th you have not succeeded that we consider the idea given up. We have property in view & quite ready to go on & build the Hall Capital all ready—although we will wait on you until Feby 15th

If we build it will be much farther up town—not below 56th. Would not build upon Madison Square if we have to invest beyond the last 50,000 ft I agreed to take [illegible]. Perhaps if your people leased us ground & agreed that our investment for Hall should bear [*crossed out*: up to illegible] interest upon cost and first net receipts, before ground rent was payable We might consider it—in that case you would have to clear a part from Mortgage & lease to us: but [illegible] increase your investment.

Yours

Andrew Carnegie

We will organize Feby 15th unless we hear from you. AC